

Pastoral Renewal and Adult Faith Development

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Voices from the floor: 'the national pastoral conference as we experienced it'

The conference about which we have been writing in the last two issues of *Intercom* had, for many, real potential to impact positively on life, mission and ministry in our Church.

So far, we have not acknowledged the valuable contribution made by the four brave people in our picture here. At the very outset on the opening day, they offered what we call 'voices from the context'. By stepping out and introducing themselves and speaking to how the conference theme relates to them in their own life and ministry, they (1) helped the conference as a whole to find its voice (2) modelled the method to be used throughout the event and (3) added to all other efforts to introduce our guest speaker to our context and culture.

For this issue, between us we have interviewed four other participants, Bairbre Cahill, Sr Mary Kenny, Bishop Colm O'Reilly and Fr Liam Power. Our questions to each were the same: what is your overall memory of the conference; what was it like for you to be there?; what for you were the most significant aspects of the event? And what are you hoping for now?

We have chosen to simply express here our appreciation to our respondents for their generosity and commitment to the task, and to allow the conversations to speak for themselves.

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Bairbre Cahill,
Pastoral Resource Worker in the Diocese of Raphoe

My overall memory of the conference is one of being energised and excited. I was with a very diverse group of people who share passion for the Church. I was impressed by the age profile – there was a good age range represented.

The round table arrangement created a sense of equality in the conversations. These were very dynamic and I found myself putting huge energy into the process. As well as passion, there was an ability to acknowledge challenges and difficulties.

Among the most **significant aspects** for me was the sense of validation of what I stand for – communion and



Voices from the context: l to r Bishop Kieran O'Reilly, Fr James McKiernan, Clare McMahon and Sr Mary Mangan SHJM, with Sr Colette Stevenson, facilitator

Photo: Brenda Durm

co-responsibility are not modern, liberal, dangerous notions. Rather, they are rooted in the essence of the Church as recognised and promoted by Vatican II. The conference awakened real excitement about Vatican II. It brought to life what happened there and its relevance to where we are at now.

The vision of Church distilled from Vatican II, as presented by Gaillardetz, was hugely engaging, and there was something strengthening about it coming from a lay, married theologian. Communion and co-responsibility are not optional extras. Rather, they are absolutely vital to being Church. Likewise, the Council's understanding of revelation as a relationship between God and humanity set Vatican II, the Church and the conference in a fresh context: the Word of God is given to the whole Church, which is called to discern what the Spirit is saying.

There was a great connection for me with my ministry with parishes and family, rooted as it is in a belief in the presence and action of God at the heart of our day-to-day lives. Pope John XXIII wanted to enable us to share what we have, what it means in our life-context to be a follower of Christ.

My hope now? I want us to commit to communion and co-responsibility as a vision of Church. Do it with same commitment and passion and resources as we have done in relation to safeguarding. I have an anxiety that the event would be reduced in people's minds to the speaker (even one as effective as Gaillardetz) and so left to exist in a bubble. That would leave me frustrated. We need really good theology of baptism and of priesthood. We need this theology to be the basis of the formation for ordained priesthood.

We need to acknowledge that we are *on the way* to the fullness of truth and life – what Gaillardetz called



'eschatological humility'. At the conference we got a glimpse of the energy that's released in honest conversation. There we were with people who have passion for the Church, who had no negative agenda; with people who were living out of the richness of our faith and of the Church.

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Sr Mary Kenny,
Presentation Sister, presently member of leadership team of Province; formerly on staff of the Western Theological Institute
Overall memory now?/What was it like to be there?

My overall memory of the pastoral conference now is: there was energy in the group, and it was palpable. It was a very positive event. At the same time, the people there were very realistic. They were very committed, and there was a great openness among them. All elements in the Church were represented – bishops, clergy, religious and lay people. In fact, there were also some there who felt disaffected by the Church right now, 'on the fringes', who had wondered if it was somewhere they should be. Of these, however, two told me personally they were actually glad to be there; 'there is something happening here' they said. I was delighted with that.



The structured dialogue was very powerful. It showed that we are able to talk to each other. In the past there has been a lot of fear in the different elements/sectors of the Church but it seemed to me that fear did not get in the way at the conference.

On several occasions during the conference I was reminded of the Western Theological Institute and what we were attempting there in the area of renewal. I found myself wishing that we could have captured the energy and the enthusiasm and the good will that was so evident at the conference. With *Share the Good News*, *National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*, the Vatican II documents and the CCC, we have the means to do great things now if we can tap them and connect with what the Spirit is doing among us.

In the WTI we were trying to assist with renewal in the local Church. We were attempting to get dialogues started. I think that both of these were articulated clearly at the conference.

During my time in the WTI we had organised programmes which involved working with clergy and I was delighted to see quite a number of those who had participated in those programmes also present at this conference. I was delighted to see their interest in on-going learning.

One more thing about my overall memory of the conference: it was the first time that I had witnessed so many religious at such an event. This conference gave them a distinct voice in the dialogue and that was very welcome.

What were the most significant aspects of the conference?

The structured dialogue was very significant. I also found the articulation of the fact that we now have *Share the Good News* together with the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the Catechism of the Catholic Church to be very significant. We have the material and we need to find a way forward. Richard Gaillardetz articulated this for us but, for me, it became clearer during the three days when I was working with and in dialogue within the groups. There is clearly a lot of good will. It is also clear that there is a need for leadership. The Bishops' Conference authorised the conference and must now follow it up, offering ways forward – without this very little is going to happen which would be a direct outcome of the event and that would be a pity. Bishops need to gather the people – laity, clergy and religious – and find a way to 'get at it' so-to-speak.

What are you hoping for now?

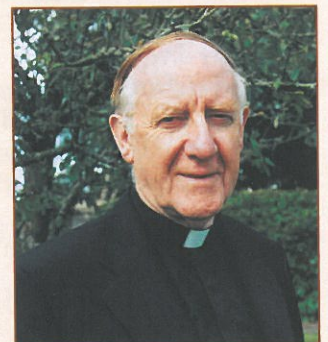
Where is all this going to happen? It needs especially to happen at local level, in the parishes. We now have the tools to work locally and the language to talk to each other, bishops, laity, priests and religious. The old Irish proverb tells us 'Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann muid'. So let us do it.

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Bishop Colm O'Reilly,
Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois

My experience of the conference

I was glad that I could welcome the conference participants to the diocese, and for an event which was aimed at supporting the work of renewal and reform. I found this refreshing. I understood we would focus on the future, guided by the wisdom of Vatican II, and I was not disappointed.



I was very pleased that we were encouraged to keep clear of the 'blame game'. This, in my view, helped to steer us in a positive direction, for example in the feedback from the structured dialogue.

The most significant aspects

Engaging in group discussion is never easy but during this conference the dialogue was probably 'as good as it gets'. It was noticeable that the talk at lunch and coffee break continued in a way that was related to the input from Richard Gaillardetz, a tribute to him no doubt.

One participant wondered why bishops were so silent ... However, we have all, I think, tended to adopt silent listening as a helpful way of encouraging greater 'freedom of speech' in our own meetings at diocesan level. I would be interested to know what others thought.

I always come away after conferences feeling that there was more than we could take in, and this was what I felt once again. However, I have been reading the Council Decrees again! That is saying something positive about the Conference.

What I am hoping for now

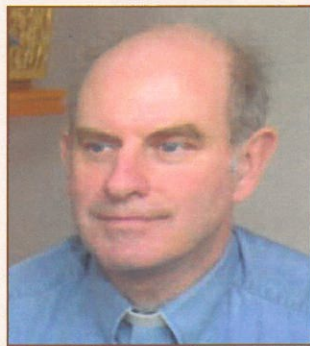
It is my hope that I will hold on to the positive feelings that the Conference created and that the documents will come alive again for me in the Year of Faith.

In our present context, I am also hoping that we can develop helpful ways of being in dialogue at every level in the Church, in line with what was modelled at the conference.

Fr Liam Power,
*Parish Priest of St John's Parish, Waterford,
and Diocesan Director of Pastoral Development in Waterford
and Lismore*

My experience of the pastoral conference

As I remember it now my experience was very positive, in that there was a real sense of community. We came from places, parishes and dioceses all around the country at a time when we need more than ever to be in dialogue, a time when the challenges of our context and our situation are enormous. The people who gathered for the three-day event were representative of the whole Church – lay, religious and ordained, including members of the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) – and their common interests were evident even at the gathering stage, ahead of the formal beginning. We were not just people who work at pastoral development. There were also members of parish pastoral councils and people involved in a variety of capacities, and this gave rise to a remarkable dynamic in the whole event. The fact that there was significant representation from the Episcopal Conference encouraged us to hope that we were not speaking in a vacuum.



The most significant aspects of the conference

The Gaillardetz inputs infused new spirit into the documents of Vatican II. The vitality of documents with which we were already familiar was brought home. I have engaged with adult groups all across our own diocese and beyond, and I have struggled to communicate the vision of Vatican II, getting beyond (or below) the level of abstraction in the texts themselves. Here I found that the presentations stirred my imagination again and refreshed my appreciation of the documents. Gaillardetz' breadth of vision and experience was inspirational. I say it amounted to a

rediscovery, even a 'retrieval' of Vatican II, in terms of understanding Church and Church-in-world. By being taken back (re-introducing us) to the sources, inviting us to take a fresh look at the dynamics that produced the documents, we got a deep appreciation of how radical they were and of their continued relevance for today.

The significance of Baptism, the appreciation of the call of the baptised to discipleship, the central role of lay people in church and world - all these were brought to life with huge expertise by Gaillardetz. Clarification on the on-going, challenging questions of ministry and of ordained priesthood in this context was very helpful, and it addressed by implication the dangers for us as Church of being inward-looking and cut off from a world perceived as hostile. The embedding of all of the Council's work in the renewed theology of revelation as 'personalist', i.e. primarily relational, provided a key to a fresh, dynamic and enthusiastic ownership of our faith, and of what is to be expressed, for example, in liturgical celebration.

What I am now hoping for now

There is real danger of polarisation in our Church at present. There is evidence that the sectors which were together as a vibrant community during the conference are by and large out of touch with one another in the wider context, often leading to mutually dismissive attitudes. We are in a dangerous, challenging situation. It is vitally important that the Bishops' Conference as a body be seen to be open to dialogue. Its Council for Clergy has been dormant for years, and its refusal to meet with the ACP, for whatever reason, has reflected very badly on the Church. Priests are constantly hearing this criticism of the lack of structures for dialogue.

By contrast, I found the method of dialogue at the pastoral conference to be hugely significant. How it was done pointed to further possibilities. Bishop, priests, lay people and religious could talk to one another in mutual respect, could listen to one another with appreciation. The rich experience of the conference emphasised and highlighted for me that there is no alternative to dialogue as a way to live 'communion and co-responsibility', our model for Church in our time.

Presentations given by Richard Gaillardetz at the conference were recorded by Éist, and are available (€25) from www.eist.ie.